

JOHN McDERMOTT

John McDermott can recall the precise moment when he realized he had made the right decision to give up his day job and make singing his full-time career. That moment came at 8 p.m. on October 5th, 1993 at the Rebecca Cohn Theatre in Halifax, Nova Scotia as he walked on stage to a full house and a thunderous East Coast welcome.

As he mentioned to a magazine interviewer, John remembers the details so well because it was the first concert with his own band, following a year as the opening act for the internationally renowned Irish group, The Chieftains. John was thrilled that the Halifax crowd was wildly enthusiastic – so enthusiastic, in fact, that their encore-encouraging applause kept the show going for more than four hours.

Not that many years before, John had been working in the circulation department of one of Toronto's daily newspapers, The Sun. As a creative outlet, he would sing a few Irish and Scottish folk tunes at staff gatherings – songs he had learned growing up in a musical household in Willowdale, Ontario after his family moved there from Glasgow, Scotland. His father Peter – John still considers him the finest tenor he has ever heard – and his mother Hope encouraged family sing-a-longs. The only formal musical training John received was when he attended St. Michael's Choir School in Toronto for two years.

John recorded an album of Irish and Scottish ballads as a nice 50th wedding anniversary gift for his parents. He recorded 12 tracks, one for each of the 12 McDermott children, then added one more version of Danny the way his father liked to hear it sung a cappella.

Those who heard the album encouraged John to have it produced commercially. Recalling that a couple of entertainment business heavyweights, Michael Cohl and Bill Ballard, had been impressed with his singing at a Karaoke Night during the Toronto Floating Film Festival a couple of years earlier, John took the album to Ballard, who put him in touch with the president of EMI Music Canada.

EMI released 2,000 copies on November 10, 1992. The next day being Remembrance Day, famed Canadian broadcaster Peter Gzowski played three tracks from the album – *And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda*, *Danny Boy* and *Christmas in the Trenches*. The stores couldn't keep it on the shelves and more copies were quickly produced. A few months later, Paul McGrath, a CBC-TV documentary maker who had also attended St. Michael's Choir School, profiled John in a short piece that Peter Mansbridge aired on his prime time nightly newscast The National. Within a short time the album had sold more than 50,000 copies.

EMI began urging their new 'find' to go on tour to capitalize on the success of the album. John resisted at first because he had a steady job at the Toronto tabloid. Then he remembered Bill Ballard and Michael Cohl saying that if he ever turned professional, he should get in touch. John once again contacted Ballard, who arranged for the gig with The Chieftains. Hedging his bets, John took a leave of absence from The Sun in case his musical career failed to take off. As things turned out, he needn't have worried.

Throughout 1994, John toured Australia and New Zealand where *Danny Boy* had topped the charts. In 1995, Ballard arranged a British tour with The Seekers. John played his first U.S. concert at Boston's Ritz Carlton Hotel in 1995 and a member of the audience went backstage to pay his respects. It was Senator Ted Kennedy and the American icon invited John to perform at the Democratic National Convention in 1996. They became friends and John, at Ted's request, frequently visited the Kennedy Compound at Cape Cod. When the Massachusetts senator died in August, 2009, John was invited to sing at the memorial service.

Since the beginning of his musical career, John has recorded more than 25 albums, three of which have gone platinum while another has reached double platinum status and yet another achieved a triple platinum ranking. His latest offerings are entitled *The Old House* – a collaboration with his long-time musical director, guitarist and artist in his own right, Jason Fowler – and *My Gentle Harp: A Tribute To Thomas Moore*, the musician, poet and singer who lived from 1779 to 1852. *The Old House* offers such perennial favourites as *Wild Mountain Thyme*, *The Cliffs of Doneen* and *Red is the Rose*, as well as the hilarious crowd-pleaser *I'm My Own Grandpa*. With *My Gentle Harp*, John pays homage to the man whose words have been used in opera, in the works of James Joyce and have been featured in performances on some of the greatest stages of the world. For more than 200 years, Thomas Moore's poetry, prose and music have touched the lives of millions and continue to have an important influence on the arts to this day.

There are many other milestones in John's career. His concerts are sell-outs and sales of his albums are brisk. In addition, John is a perennial favourite to sing the National Anthem at Toronto Maple Leafs home games, and he has met five U.S. presidents. He has been nominated for a number of Juno awards and received the U.S. Congressional Medal of Honor Society's Bob Hope Award for his support for veterans' causes.

Veterans are special to John. His father, who died in 1995, served in the Royal Air Force. John's mother, who lived on for about five years after her husband's death, had a brother who died in the notorious Changi Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. Two of John's cousins were killed in Vietnam and another took his own life after serving there. In 2010, John was awarded a Minister of Veterans Affairs Commendation for his work on behalf of veterans. He is also an honorary member of the War Amps of Canada.

A current project close to John's heart is his drive to raise \$3.6 million to enhance and expand the Palliative Care unit – K-Wing Veterans Centre – at Toronto's Sunnybrook Hospital. He wants to help the staff give the best possible care to their patients – veterans, serving members of the military, First Responders such as police officers and firemen, and members of the general public who are admitted to the unit.

Funding for the project so far has come from a series of concerts entitled *Music in the Key of Giving* as well as from corporate sponsorships and individual donations made through John's not-for-profit charitable foundation, McDermott House Canada. John is particularly touched by the donations from people with little cash to spare – especially senior citizens who send in \$2 or \$5 because they realize the importance of having the project succeed.

To make a contribution or to obtain information on upcoming concerts, visit www.mcdermotthousecanada.org.

To keep up-to-date with John's album releases, news and other information visit: www.johnmcdermott.com